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ABSTRACT

In an "Esquire" magazine column, John Simon attempts to trivialize, through visual satire, the articulation by Wayne O'Neil of the linguistic position that teaching standard English perpetuates oppression and is itself oppressive; but his attempt provides, instead, a vivid representation of the political relationship between the teaching of standard English and the maintenance of the patriarchal social order. Simon misrepresents standard English as "simply the language that evolved from diverse sources into a norm"; however, no language "simply evolves" into a "norm"--social forces are always involved in promoting those language forms and changes that reflect the interests of its most powerful users. An analysis of changes in the use and semantic range of such words as "she," "he," "husband," "wife," and "man" in Old and Middle English show how specific changes can be traced to male control of the social structure. Sample passages from the work of seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century male grammarians demonstrate that the tradition of prescriptive grammars in English incorporates patriarchal assumptions regarding the superiority of the male sex and the inferiority of the female sex. The consequences of an 1850 Act of Parliament, which designated the masculine pronoun "he" as a "generic," constitute sufficient argument against those who deny the validity of current feminist attempts to emasculate the English language. (GT)

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Language and Power: English as a Patriarchal Language*

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* Paper delivered on the panel SCHOOL ENGLISH AND SOCIAL ORDER at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 5-7, 1979.

Among the many recent crusaders who have leaped forward (into the breach) to rescue our hapless "Mother Tongue" from the dragons of misuse and error is the critic John Simon, who, as some of you may know, writes a monthly column for Esquire ominously and patristically entitled "The Language," capital "T", capital "L". In the January 30, 1979 issue of that magazine, Simon's column bore the headline, "The Waning of O'Neil," with an accompanying subtitle, "A linguist would liberate the masses—from standard English." (Standard English is, you understand, The Language.) Positioned in a strategically prominent place on the page is the following "cartoon" evidently intended to satirize O'Neil's opinions regarding the teaching of standard English in the schools. (I must put the word cartoon in quotation marks because I find patriarchal humor not only not "funny" but so accurately representative of the world as I perceive it as to be painful to read or listen to.)

This "illustration" is supposed to be "funny." We (Simon's readers) are expected to laugh at what Simon regards as the ludicrousness of O'Neil's belief that "language in general is a political act." As soon as we all can stop

laughing at Simon's penetrating "wit," let's take a closer look at the drawing itself and the message contained therein. As you may be able to tell from my reproduction, the two figures look like characters in a Dickens novel. That is, they represent the (18th-) 19th-century views of language that Simon tenaciously espouses. The male figure, labeled "Runningdog Capitalism," is drawn large, menacing, overpowering. He holds, ready to strike, a bludgeon, labeled "Standard English." Embedded in the thick end of the bludgeon is a dangerous spike, labeled "grammar." Cowering beneath him is a female figure who looks properly terrified, defenseless, and feminine. Her right hand is raised uselessly to protect a flying ringlet; she leans, almost seductively, on her left elbow; her hair is in disarray; she is labeled "Lower Orders." But there is more to the picture. She is missing the shoe on her left foot--violence has already occurred. How else would she have come to be lying on her back? Her legs are spread apart; the right leg of the male figure is not-so-obviously "thrust" between them. She is conquered. The visual message of the picture is unmistakable: Simon (or the artist) clearly understood the import of O'Neil's statement that "language is a political act." The dominant order wielding the weapon of standard English is (white?) male; the conquered, passive masses are female. The imposition of standard English is clearly represented as a threatening assault that is fatal in its consequences. All of this is, perhaps, a bit overstated, but representations of a position by those opposed to it usually are. What is most striking about the picture is its <u>accuracy</u>! That is, the opposition's attempt to trivialize, through visual satire, Wayne O'Neil's articulation of the linguistic position that teaching standard English perpetuates oppression and is oppressive in and of itself provides us, instead, with a vivid representation of the way in which they conceptualize the political relationship between the teaching

of standard English and the maintenance of patriarchal social order. Here, the patriarchy, perhaps erroneously conceived as "Runningdog Capitalism," stands ready to beat the "Lower Orders," characterized as female, into submission. There should be no need to remind this audience that the "lower orders" have traditionally been described by typically "feminine" labels: "passive," "lazy," "shiftless," "sneaky," "manipulative," "cowardly," "inferior," "stupid," "sexually promiscuous," etc. I won't go on. You know the entire list as well as I do. Nor will I belabor what should, by now, be obvious: The concept of some "standard," "pure," "ideal" form of English was created and has been perpetuated as a major element in the struggle to retain control of social structures in the hands of the male elite.

One might now ask: If standard English is promulgated only in the interest of maintaining the patriarchy, why did John Simon choose to single out Wayne O'Neil, another male, for his venomous attack? John Simon explains his reason in his opening paragraph.

> One of the serious threats to the future of English comes from certain college and university professors who undermine the teaching of the language from within. One such professor is Wayne O'Neil, who after a recent Dick Cavett Show on which we both appeared, rebuked me for wasting this column on unimportant matters. Heeding this warning, I address myself to a more suitable target: Wayne O'Neil. (p. 77)

Without apologetics, Simon undertakes one of the classic types of fallacious argument, ad hominem; using O'Neil, who does make an attractive target, Simon attempts to discredit those of us who are linguists or so inclined in our teaching

of English. In this way, Simon can ignore the substantive issues, the evidence in favor of O'Neil's position, and the facts that discredit his own opinion. Unlike Nixon, I do want to be "perfectly clear": I am not going to defend Wayne O'Neil. Unfortunately, in spite of the superiority implied by Simon's use of quotations from articles by O'Neil, some of his (Simon's) points are well taken. I think there are several creditable reasons for Simon's attack on O'Neil rather than on the substance of his position. First, O'Neil is a male, employed by the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He is, thus, clearly a traitor to the social structure that maintains his position on the basis of sexual politics. Second, O'Neil himself rarely (if ever) argues for the linguistic position on the basis of evidence. Instead, he, too, is beguiled by his own rhetoric, more convinced than convincing. As a consequence of his own fuzzy thinking, he sinks to Simon's level of argumentation and becomes vulnerable to the easiest kind of refutation, refutation by simple quotation. Third, O'Neil doesn't write well. That is, he is not an articulate spokesperson for the position he endorses. O'Neil's muddled syntax makes it possible for Simon to assert that O'Neil is a linguist (by claim), that O'Neil can't write, hence linguists can't write and are stupid. Fourth, O'Neil does, indeed, make some stupid statements, for example, that he corrects only the spelling and punctuation of his students. I won't bother you with the equally stupid construction that Simon puts on this statement, but certainly one would think that a linguist would pay less attention to typographical items such as spelling and focus on the syntactic and semantic problems of which punctuation problems are often symptomatic, areas in which the specifics of linguistic training are most useful to students. Finally, it is noteworthy that Simon attacks Wayne O'Neil but not

James Sledd, Paul Roberts, Albert Marckwardt, or any number of other, more articulate proponents of the linguistic approach to the study and teaching of language, who would make more worthy, if formidable, opponents.

In fact, Wayne O'Neil is so vulnerable on the points for which John Simon takes him to task that I find it impossible to defend him. What I can do is attack the outright lies in Simon's polemic and expose the flimsiness of his own argumentation. Now, anyone who knows anything at all about the English language, its development, and the origins of prescriptive grammars knows that Simon's position depends upon misrepresentation for its credibility. What may not be obvious are the historical facts of English that reveal its patriarchal bias and the ways in which male grammarians have promoted patriarchal interests in their prescriptive "rules" for "correct" English. Consider for example the following passage from John Simon's article:

> . . . O'Neil perceives standard English as a tool by means of which the ruling capitalist middle class (as he sees it) keeps the lower orders subjugated in their lowly station. Accordingly, standard English is merely a shibboleth, a linguistic method of identifying an outsider. As O'Neil puts it, 'The enterprise of making lower-class speakers over into middle-class speakers was never meant to be successful except insofar as it has been necessary from time to time to recruit some few of them into the middle class.' As you can see, this is the conspiracy theory of American education, and <u>it is, I believe, a grievous insult to a good many hardworking English teachers who struggle against overwhelming odds to teach their pupils standard English</u>,

> which is simply the language that evolved from diverse sources into a norm. This norm enables people of goodwill and average or better intelligence to communicate more effectively, sometimes even beautifully. (p. 77, italics mine)

Let us, for the sake of clarity, ignore the fact that Simon labels O'Neil's statement "the conspiracy theory of American education" because it's simply too ridiculous to credit patriarchy with the requisite intelligence for promulgating a conspiracy, and there's no immediate need to comment upon Simon's blatant use of clichés in his own rhetorical effort. What I would like to call to your attention is the syntactic structure in which he couches his most obvious lie. If you will consult the tree diagram provided below (Figure 1), you will notice how deeply embedded his major statement is. Teachers, which is the head noun for all that follows, is the object of the preposition to in its clause. Within the relative clause for which teachers is the head noun, we find the infinitive clause to teach their students standard English; standard English, the object of the infinitive to teach, becomes the head noun for the lie, which is simply the language that evolved from diverse sources into a norm. The statement I am objecting to occurs in the most deeply embedded relative clause of the sentence. Simon's statement is doublespeak/doublethink at its sleazy "best."

Figure 1

No language "simply evolves" into any kind of a "norm," even under the best conditions. Social forces are always actively involved in promoting those forms of the language, and those changes in the language, that reflect the interests

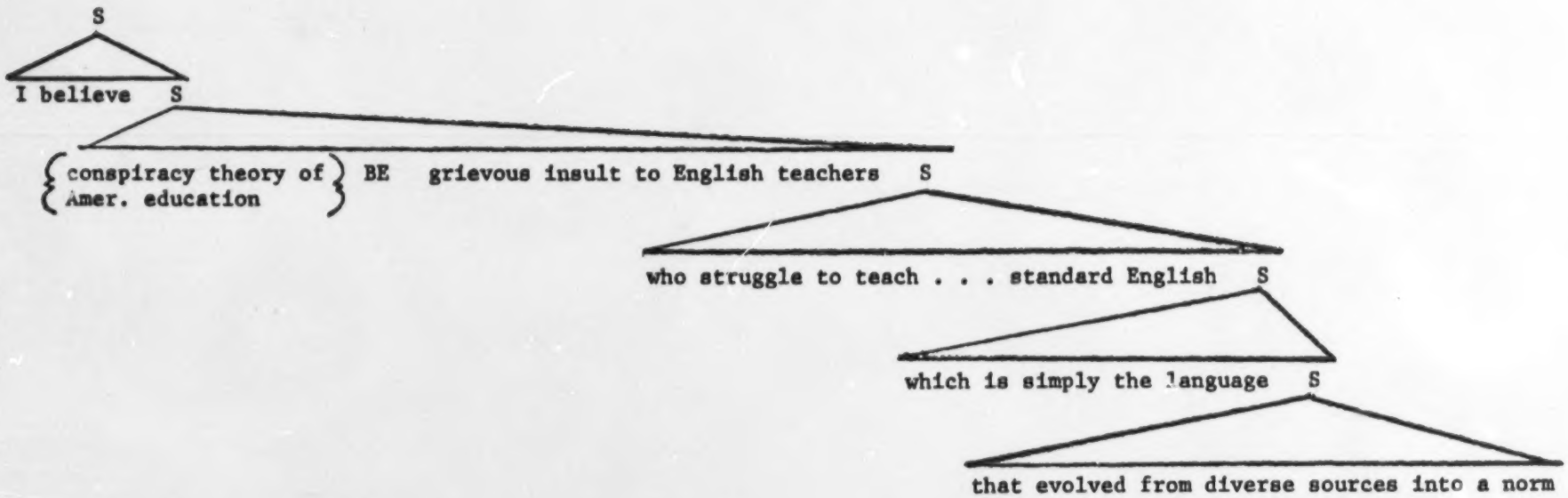
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Figure 1: Representation of embedded statements from John Simon

of its most powerful users. One need only remember that English, the language of Britain, was used only among the "lower orders" during the Norman French occupation to verify the relationship between language use and political/economic/social power. In fact, it is hard to imagine what English might have been if the Battle of Hastings had never occurred. Certainly, this single example demonstrates that English hasn't "simply evolved." Or, take the appearance of the female third person singular pronoun she (Stanley and Robbins, 1978). That pronoun was borrowed from as yet undiscovered sources in the late Middle English period. Old English, you will recall, had the form hēo for the female third person nominative, and the related forms, hī in the accusative, and hire for the dative and genitive. At some point, a maximally-distinctive form, schēo (and its variants), began to be used in the northern dialects of ME and spread southward. No one knows for sure where this form came from or why it spread throughout the rest of the dialects of ME. One currently popular folk-etymology holds that schēo gained in usage because the native hēo female nominative pronoun had become homophonous with the male nominative hē, and the homophony created a situation in which "psychological necessity" required the acquisition of a maximally-distinctive female nominative pronoun. Both Pyles (1971) and Strang (1970) cite "psychological necessity" for supposedly "unconscious" changes in the lexicon. It is worthwhile to note at this point that, had hēo and hē actually become a single third person nominative pronoun, modern he would, indeed, be a true generic instead of merely a masculine pronoun. (For a fuller examination of the problems concerning the introduction of schēo into the ME vocabulary, see Stanley and Robbins, 1978.)

It should not be surprising, or controversial, when one finds that the structure of English has been changed, and that specific changes can be traced

to male control of the social structure. Consider, for example, the ModE word husband. Husband was apparently a "new" concept during early OE; it is a compound term, hūs 'house' plus bonda 'freeholder'. (There is some evidence that OE influences were at work here.) There is no IE cognate term for husband, so the notion of males living with wimmin must have still been relatively recent in its development, something many commentators on the language see fit to ignore. Of even more interest, however, was the addition of yet another compound to the OE vocabulary, wīfman. The OE word wīf is descended from the OE vocabulary, and it retained its original meaning, 'female human being,' well into the OE period. At the same time, the term was becoming narrower in its semantic range, and eventually it came to mean only 'female attached to a male.' Perhaps as a consequence of the narrower semantic range accorded to the word wīf, the compound wīfman came to be used more and more frequently to mean 'female human being.' Now, why, one might ask, did the speakers of OE feel they needed a new term to refer to female human beings? Surely, in this case, it is clear that the development of a compound term was not needed because 'female human being' was a new concept to the people of OE society. It is possible, although there is no way that I could offer empirical evidence for the hypothesis, that both new compounds, wīfman and husband, are lexical items that were simply part of larger shifts in the OE vocabulary that came about as a consequence of increased patriarchal influence during that time (Stanley and McGowan, 1979). For example, the companion term for wīf in OE was wer, cognate with Lat. vir. That is, wer referred to 'male human being' as wīf referred to 'female human being.' During the same period, however, wer began to drop from usage, and the term man, once a true generic in the Germanic languages, began to develop its current specialized meaning, 'male human being.' Once man had been established as a term for

designating the male of the species, wer became obsolete, and it occurs now only in the compound werewolf. Not surprisingly, there was what was apparently a further "trimming" of the OE vocabulary, as we lost many terms that designated both female and male human beings, among them: For females, mēowle, īdes, fæmma; for males, beorn, guma, secg. The picture that emerges from such a perspective on vocabulary changes looks something like this: As males continued to consolidate their social/political power in the British Isles, perhaps with the support and encouragement of the then-nascent Christian empire, they first began to favor the male-specific use of the once-generic man; wer dropped out of popular usage. As the semantic range of man was narrowed, so, too, was the range of reference of the word wīf. Any woman was, thus, assumed to be attached to a male, and the new compound husband was created to designate the other member of the pair-bond. As the range of social opportunities for wimmin continued to narrow, so, too, did the available terms for such designations, witness the loss of lōcbōre 'free woman,' gūðcwena 'battle woman,' mæðenhēap 'band of female warriors.' In the midst of this lexical turmoil, the compound wīfman appears as a new term for 'female human being.' As wimmin were increasingly defined as the "Other" and subordinate to immediate male control in the home, so the compound further defines wimmin in terms of males. (I will not discuss here the regularization of spelling in the 14th century but will merely note the interesting parallel with the OF femelle, which came to be spelled female on the assumption that its second syllable was, or should be, the term male.)

It was during the 18th century, that time during which the prescriptive grammars were being written, that saw the inclusion of patriarchal assumptions regarding the relationships between the sexes in what became the texts of

"standard English." It is worthy of note that the earliest rule favoring the use of the masculine third person nominative pronoun as the only "correct" usage doesn't appear until Murray's grammar of 1795, and then Murray doesn't formulate a rule that says "Use the masculine third person singular pronoun as a generic to replace indefinite pronouns and common human nouns." What he does in fact is rather indirect: Under his heading "Rule V--Pronouns and antecedents," Murray gives the following example as an illustration of a "violation" of pronominal concord, although his definition of pronoun agreement doesn't cover the sentence: "Can any one, on their entrance into the world, be fully secure that they shall not be deceived?" (p. 96) Without additional comment or explanation for the "violation" of pronoun agreement, Murray corrects the "error" to read "on his entrance" and "that he shall." If we didn't have the past 200 years of prescriptivism as evidence, we might be tempted to think that Murray's covert adoption of the masculine as the "generic" pronoun was merely fortuitous.

His advocacy of the masculine pronoun he as the "correct" usage was, however, solidly grounded in the work of the grammarians who preceded him, and it was endorsed by virtually all those who followed him. (Those who disagreed, however mildly, did not find their way into the plagiarized texts of the 20th century.) Sample passages from John Fell (1784), Jonathan Poole (1646), Murray (1795), James Beattie (1788), and Goold Brown (1851) demonstrate the near-unanimity among male grammarians on the superiority of the masculine gender in English.*

* References to these early grammars of English are to the Scolar Press facsimile edition, English Linguistics, 1500-1800, ed. R. C. Alston.

The English Language applies the distinction of genders only to animals: all other words are neuter, except when, by a poetical or rhetorical fiction, inanimate things, and qualities, are spoken of, as if they were persons; then they become either Masculine or Feminine. This is done, for the most part, by the use of the pronoun, which, in the English Language, is more distinct and forcible than in some other languages. (My italics.) In poetical or theoretical expressions of this kind, moral qualities, such as wisdom, truth, justice, reason, virtue, and religion, are of the feminine gender. The passions must be determined according to their different natures: the fiercer and more disagreeable are masculine--the softer and more amiable are feminine. Mind is masculine, soul feminine; for the latter term more of the affections are frequently implied than in the former. The sun is masculine, the moon feminine, the Heaven neuter--the earth is feminine; mountains and rivers are commonly masculine; countries and cities are feminine--and nature, as comprehending all, is feminine.

(John Fell, An Essay Towards an English Grammar, 1784: pp. 5-6)

The Masculine gender is more worthy than the Feminine, and the Feminine is more worthy than the Neuter.

(Jonathan Poole, The English Accidence, 1646: p. 21)

Figuratively, in the English tongue, we commonly give the masculine gender to nouns which are conspicuous for the attributes of imparting or communicating, and which are by nature strong and efficacious. Those, again, are made feminine which are conspicuous for the attributes

of containing or bringing forth, or which are peculiarly beautiful or amiable. Upon these principles the sun is always masculine, and the moon, because the receptacle of the sun's light, is feminine. The earth is generally feminine. A ship, a country, a city, &c. are likewise made feminine, being receivers or containers. Time is always masculine, on account of its mighty efficacy. Virtue is feminine from its beauty, and its being the object of love. Fortune and the church are generally put in the feminine gender. . . .

Of the variable terminations, we have only a sufficient number to make us feel our want; for when we say of a woman, she is a philosopher, an astronomer, a builder, a weaver, we perceive an impropriety in the termination, which we cannot avoid; but we can say that she is an architect, a botanist, a student, because these terminations have not annexed to them the notion of sex.

(Murray, English Grammar, 1795: pp. 24-25)

Beings superiour to man, although we conceive them to be of no sex, are spoken of as masculine in most of the modern tongues of Europe, on account of their dignity; the male being, according to our ideas, the nobler sex. But idolatrous nations acknowledge both male and female deities; and some of them have given even to the Supreme Being a name of the feminine gender.

When we personify the virtues, we speak of them as if they were females; perhaps on account of their loveliness;. . .

(James Beattie, The Theory of Language, 1788: p. 137)

1.—The different genders in grammar are founded on the natural distinction of sex in animals, and on the absence of sex in other things. In English, they belong only to nouns and pronouns; and to these they are usually applied, not arbitrarily, as in some other languages, but agreeably to the order of nature. From this we derive a very striking advantage over those who use the gender differently, or without such rule; which is, that our pronouns are easy of application, and have a fine effect when objects are personified. Pronouns are of the same gender as the nouns for which they stand.

2.—The gender of words, in many instances, is to be determined by the following principle of universal grammar. Those terms which are equally applicable to both sexes (if they are not expressly applied to females), and those plurals which are known to include both sexes, should be called masculine in parsing; for, in all languages, the masculine gender is considered the most worthy,* and is generally employed when both sexes are included under one common term. Thus parents is always masculine, . . .

*"The Supreme Being (God, . . .) is, in all languages, masculine; in as much as the masculine sex is the superior and more excellent; and as He is the Creator of all, the Father of gods and men."
(Goold Brown, Grammar of English Grammars, 1851)

Examples such as these, which expose statements such as Simon's for the lies that they are, could be multiplied, but I won't bore you with additional examples of male arrogance. Suffice it to say that the tradition of prescriptive

grammars in English shows clearly the incorporation of patriarchal assumptions regarding the superiority of the male sex and the inferiority of the female sex. (For a more thorough examination of the prescriptive grammars see Stanley, 1978.)

In fact, the masculine pronoun he was not touted as a "generic" until after the passage of an Act of Parliament in 1850. The text of that act reads as follows:

> An Act for shortening the language used in acts of Parliament . . . in all acts words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females, and the singular to include the plural, and the plural the singular, unless the contrary as to gender and number is expressly provided.
> (As cited in Bodine, 1975: 136)

I think the consequences of that 1850 Act of Parliament constitute sufficient argument in themselves against those who use the "let's not try to legislate language use" argument as a means of denying the validity of feminist attempts to emasculate the English language. S. I. Hayakawa, that great advocate of freedom, offered the following observation in a recent edition of "Shoptalk," published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich:

> Should we demand that all writers adopt a 'nonsexist' vocabulary and always use it--for example, the neutral plural? On this point history can be our guide. Most of the attempts to force living language in a doctrinaire program have failed resoundingly. Jonathan Swift once spoke out acidly against the use of the word

> 'mob' as a corrupt shortening of the Latin term 'mobile vulgus.' Dr. Samuel Johnson refused to admit the word 'civilization' into his dictionary because it seemed to him a barbarism, in spite of its respectable Latin root. He lost. In this century Mussolini tried to eliminate the informal 'tu' in Italian . . . and covered Italy with posters commanding Italians to use the 'voi' form instead. He failed. The social forces that created the words in the first place could not be changed by logic, fiat, or program. Language has always proved stronger than individuals.
>
> —from Language in Thought and Action, Fourth Edition.

Indeed! Such pablum from a male who has made a lot of money urging students to beware of biased uses of language! If we take his advice and let "history be our guide," we can expect only more of the same: Continued masculinization of English and the use of male-authored grammars to promulgate the dogma that wimmin should be seen and not heard, in the language, in the classroom, in the White House.

Any teacher of English who knowingly continues to teach prescriptive grammars of English in her/his classroom willingly becomes an accomplice to one of the most intellectually bankrupt movements in the history of our language. To teach traditional, masculinist grammars in the schools is to perpetuate and endorse the forcible mind-rape of millions of girls and young wimmin in the name of expedience, for the sake of intellectual laziness, in order to avoid risking one's own neck. Yes, let's let "history be our guide"! Let's get rid of grammars of English that teach students "the language that evolved from diverse sources into a norm." No more "back to the basics"—"back to the barricades!"

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